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American Institute of Sacred Literature.

A LETTER FROM THE PRINCIPAL CONCERNING OUR RELIGIOUS IDEAS.

MY DEAR FELLOW-STUDENT:

Do we ever stop to think of our personal religious beliefs, and the sources from which we have derived them? Is not the subject one which occasionally should receive our attention? I have in mind particularly the second part of the question. Whatever may be our religious beliefs, where do we get them? It is evident, of course, that they do not come into the world with us. What are the possible sources from which they may come, and in what proportion have they come from each of these sources? Let us now and then ask ourselves these questions, for it will surely be granted that the analysis which is involved in the answers will be helpful to us in many ways.

1. May we say that a certain portion of that which we believe concerning God and his relation to the world has come to us in an imperceptible way out of our childhood environment? This would mean that, in connection with other conceptions which have gradually come to us as our minds have grown through the stage of childhood, certain religious conceptions have also found their place and have been accepted without question. These, clearly, would be the conceptions of those about us — our parents, our friends, and, to some extent, our neighbors. How much of our stock of religious opinion has its origin in this way? While a definite answer may not be given to this question, perhaps an approximate answer may be obtained. This portion of our religious belief is something which has come to us in the same way as have the simplest ideas concerning life. It can hardly be said that it came by teaching, for certainly no formal teaching was employed. It was taken for granted. Not a question was raised. It came from the father or the mother, just as so many things came which entered into that early life and thought. Of course, these conceptions were childish in their nature; they could not be otherwise. The heaven talked about was something which we could understand as children. It must, therefore, have been a very crude conception. The same thing may be said of all the others. They were just such thoughts

about God and our relation to him as a child could appreciate. Now that we have grown up, it is fair to raise the question: How much of our present religious belief is, after all, just that same childish belief which came to us in the period of childhood before it was possible really to think upon these matters? In other words, have we grown into larger conceptions, or are we still living in the little child's environment? Each one must answer this question for himself.

Supposing that we are able to distinguish between our present position and that of the child — or, in other words, supposing that we have grown — it is possible, perhaps, to account for the growth in three ways. New beliefs have come to us, and the childish beliefs have been modified, as the result of (1) experience, (2) formal instruction, (3) the study of the Holy Scriptures. These three sources may not always be kept distinct, but they may be considered separately.

2. *Growth from experience.*— The deepest religious convictions are, in all probability, those which are rooted in the experiences of life. No one, for example, can understand the religious side of life who has not been called upon to suffer. At the same time, the prevailing opinion that religious feeling must always be associated with the sadder and sterner phases of life is a great mistake. As the nation passes through the different stages from barbarism up to civilization, each step forming the basis upon which the next step shall be taken, so the individual passes through the different experiences of life and finds himself at each stage looking back to those that have preceded, building his new conceptions upon the experience of the preceding stages. In each of these transitions one's religious ideas ordinarily undergo change to a greater or less extent. As familiarity with the phases of life grows greater, and as thought on the responsibilities of life grows more definite, one's religious opinions are adjusted; that is, they are enlarged, their horizon is broadened. Not seldom the change is a violent one, and is accompanied by distress of mind and heart. It is inevitable that, as one goes deeper, he must re-establish foundations which shall be stronger and broader. To do this requires the tearing down of that which has already been built in order that there may be room for new foundations and for the new structure.

3. *Growth through direct teaching.*— This is something which many never receive. Those who have been more fortunate will trace much of their religious opinion to the direct teaching which was received in the family, in the school, or in the church. Perhaps in these days the amount of direct religious teaching is not so great as in

former days; but some of us remember very distinctly the catechism which we were required to memorize and to repeat from week to week on Sunday afternoons. Some of us also recall that in our regular school work a certain time was reserved for direct teaching of a religious or ethical character. In most cases this was associated with the Bible. In the days when most of us were children it was customary to go to church, and it was expected that the children of the family as well as the adult members should be in regular attendance. It is possible, therefore, for many grown persons to ascribe their religious opinions to direct teaching; while for those who are children today, in the future years this may be impossible. The catechism is no longer required even where the family life is distinctly religious. The public schools no longer permit the Bible to be read, and in many quarters it is hardly expected that the adult members of the family, not to speak of the children, shall attend the Sunday religious service. However that may be, we may ask ourselves today: How much of that which we hold as an essential part of our religious belief has come to us from this kind of teaching in one form or another? Here again we may not be able to make an answer that shall be definite; but it will be possible, perhaps, to calculate more or less closely what the influence of such teaching has been.

4. There remains the more specific and more tangible source, namely, *the study of the Bible.* This, perhaps, should be associated with direct teaching, but I have thought that for the purpose of analysis we might keep it separate. To what extent are we personally and directly indebted to the Scriptures for the opinions which we hold? Is it here that we have found the formulation of our beliefs in so far as we have formulated them? Do we not readily perceive that outside of certain indefinite impressions the real content of our religious faith has had its roots in Scripture story, and has found its expression in Scripture language? Is it not true that, roughly speaking, ninety per cent. or more of the content of our religious belief has come to us directly or indirectly from the Sacred Scriptures? I may not here take space to illustrate the origin of these different beliefs, but whether we think of them from the point of view of childhood or manhood, whether we hold them as connected with historical events or as formulated in abstract creeds, is it not from the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament that we have in large measure obtained whatever we have of religious faith? From the point of view of opinion as well as of feeling, from the point of view of childhood as well as of maturity,

have we not, as a matter of fact, found in these chapters the source of comfort and of inspiration, the basis of all that has made up our religious life?

If this is true, even if it is only half true, what follows? Two things: (1) the recognition of the fact that in this collection of sacred books there will be found material which, if rightly appreciated, will give us stronger foundations for religious life and higher visions of spitual truth than any we have yet possessed; and (2) that there rests upon each one of us the definite obligation to find and to appropriate this material, and to secure possession of these larger blessings.

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